

Fiction by Peggy Shinner

Life is Adequate

Sheep, milk, TV. He's tried everything, but she never believes him. She thinks it's a joke that he can't sleep. She thinks if only he tried harder. If he really wanted to he could. All he has to do is close his eyes. It's that easy. What does she know about trying to sleep. She's young, she wants to go to sleep, she sleeps. He used to be like that. Time was he slept like a baby. He shut his eyes and went to sleep.

That was a long time ago. Lately, he can't *buy* a good night's sleep.

Sometimes she thinks he's lying. Or at least not telling the truth. He's fabricating. Exaggerating. He can hear her telling her friends. *Embellishing*. She says embellishing just so she can say a big word. He knows a big word or two. His vocabulary isn't so small.

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So she thinks he's lying. He can tell by how, when he says he can't sleep, she goes on to the next subject. She doesn't skip a beat. By the way she says *yes* and *mm-hmm*. She's humoring him. All those naps, she's thinking. Old people always say they can't sleep. They want you to feel sorry for them. But you add it up, an hour here, an hour there The morning always comes, she's thinking. He can tell.

The thing was she woke him up. He was almost sleeping. He was dozing off.

The news was on, Walter Jacobson talking about a fire on the South Side. He'd punched up a couple pillows, and from underneath him he felt them give way. His foot twitched. You could see the smoke for miles, he thought he heard an onlooker say. He reached out his hand, blinked his eyes. Faces flickered on the screen. No one was injured in the fire. Is it too late? she said. Did I wake you up? At first he didn't know who it was. He moved the receiver to the other ear. I'm returning your call, she said. He got the feeling she was repeating it. *I'm returning your call*, like he was some kind of business establishment.

He shook his head. The room was dark, except for the light from the TV. He pressed the remote a few times to

turn down the sound. His call? Oh yeah, he had to call once a week to remind her he was her father.

Nah, he said, sitting up on the edge of the bed. His zipper'd come open, but he didn't even bother to give it a tug. On the floor was a copy of *People* magazine with Lady Di on the cover. He'd been reading about the nuptials. In the mirror above the dresser he caught a glimpse of himself. He had to look a couple times. The guy he saw had eyes looking up from the grave; his face was gray. You wouldn't look so good either, he thought, taking a quick peek around like he was daring someone to disagree with him. Boy, he'd been just about to slip under. Already that felt like a while ago. He pressed his thumbs over the bridge of his nose, the phone hunched between his ear and shoulder. I'm wide awake, he told her. My eyes are glued to the TV.

Because if you want to go back to sleep . . . Her voice trailed off as if she might disturb him.

Then she mustered it up again. We can talk tomorrow.

Is there a ration?

Walter Jacobson mouthed some words he couldn't make out, then the picture switched to Vice President Mondale's daughter selling a car. Straining forward, he thought she said the word *deal*.

Dad, she said.

He waited for her to dispute him.

Cut it out.

She was starting to sound a little huffy. She had a tendency in that direction. He gulped some water from the glass on the nightstand, swiping the back of his hand across his lips. Should he tell her what happened?

After another swallow, he put the glass back.

I had a little incident. He looked down at his feet, plastered by the podiatrist, on

the carpet. Those specimens belonged to him.

A little incident?

I couldn't keep it in.

What are you talking about? she said, and then it must have dawned on her. In the receiver he heard her draw in a breath.

A weather map filled up the TV screen, and he saw the five-day forecast. Rain at the end of the week, but he didn't look that far ahead.

When did this happen? she finally said.

What does it matter when it happened. It happened. I had a little drip.

Did you call Dr. Lowenstein?

What, he's going to turn off the spigot?

Dad. She said it again.

So now you know. He braced the heel of his palm on the bed.

Know what?

All she did was repeat what he said.

I want you to have the whole picture.

Why are you talking as if I know what you're talking about? Just tell me. Her voice reached another pitch.

The light from the TV went black for a second before it lit the walls again. I'm not going to live forever, he said, with his mouth right next to the receiver.

Now he can't sleep a wink. She's at home sleeping, her head on a nice big fluffy pillow, and he's watching the shadows for entertainment. The street-light flickers in the tree. The shade slaps against the screen. Two sixteen, and the clock radio makes no effort to candy-coat it. Time was she cried at night. She woke up crying. Muriel staggered out of bed, to the crib, jiggling her back to sleep. He'd drift in and out of sleep. He'd hear the floor creaking, Muriel traipsing up and down the hallway. That was the apartment on Independence Boulevard,

a one bedroom, the crib crammed against the wall in the dining room. She asleep? he'd say when Muriel came back to bed, but most nights he'd be asleep before she answered.

He throws back the covers. Lie here all night, or lie here till morning. Those are his choices. Or take a stroll through the premises. He drags his plastered feet to the window. Exercise is good for you, she likes to tell him. Window, crapper, refrigerator, bed. All the exercise he can get. Pulling up on his boxers, he leans against the ledge. In the dark he looks at his real estate. A swatch of grass, a plot of dirt for his tomato plants, the tree his son grew from a pit. On either side a chain-link fence. Is this what it all amounts to? In spite of the rumor about stars, he doesn't spot any. They've closed their eyes; they're taking a nap. Ha-ha, but the joke's on him. Outside the crickets join in. The shadows shift. Something rustles in the bushes by the alley. Just because he doesn't believe in ghosts doesn't mean they're not out there. He flattens his forehead to the screen. A line of perspiration creases his chin. There are twenty-four hours in a day, but most of them, he concludes, searching the darkness for anything that might jump out at him, occur after midnight.

In the morning he goes to the cleaners because he can't keep anything clean. Eat, make a mess, put his money in escrow with the Chinaman, that's his routine. Last night, after Cheryl called, it was sauerkraut, but he doesn't discriminate, ha-ha. Ketchup, coffee, sour cream – he gives everything an opportunity to land on his pants.

After Cheryl called, Jack reminds himself, backing the car out of the garage, he couldn't get to sleep. Johnny Carson, then a western, a movie called *Shane*.

Shane, the boy cried to the man who might have been his father. *Come back. Shane*. With his arm draped around the passenger's side, he drums his fingers on the seat. Last night's shadows dart across the windshield. He almost slams on the brakes.

The cleaners opens at seven, and he waits for the Chinaman to unlock the door. Over the radio Wally Phillips drones on about the Variety Club charity cruise. *Sail with the stars, and for a good cause, too*. He switches the station. Everybody's got an angle, but who's going to help him?

Can you answer that?

A guy in a five hundred dollar suit whisks by, on the way to a breakfast powwow with other LaSalle Street minions who look just like him. But the rise is a little short, Jack decides, sizing up the pants.

Finally the laundryman's face appears at the door.

Jack lifts himself out of the car.

Sam, he says, dropping the bundle on the counter. He stops for a second to catch his breath. If you opened earlier maybe you'd do more business. He doesn't know the Chinaman's name but figures *Sam* is a good guess.

Business is adequate, Mr. Kamin.

He gives the Chinaman, already sorting through the pile of clothes, a closer look, and unwads last week's ticket out of his pocket. The guy's a big shot.

Five and a quarter he owes, pushing four ones and the rest in change across the counter.

You been here long, Sam? he says.

Pardon me, Mr. Kamin.

U.S.A. America. When did you come over? He lays his hands on the counter.

The Chinaman doesn't even raise his head. He's too wrapped up adding his money to the till before he scurries to the back to look for the cleaning.

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Jack eyes the box. How much can the guy bring in? Not much, for sure; you can't eat bonbons laundering other people's clothes. He shakes his head, agreeing with himself, and looks around. The Chinaman's got geranium plants in the window, to spruce things up. Well, he lived in a place like this, a three-room apartment behind the store. *TAILOR*, the sign said. His father, after forty years of hemming up suit coats, had the smell of mothballs in his hands.

A hanger clangs to the floor.

What's going on back there? Maybe Sam can't find his cleaning. His fingers tap the counter. He doesn't have all day although his only plans are to count sheep and take a nap. He smirks at his own joke. Maybe he'll go to the David Noyes brokerage firm and watch the stock returns.

A fly buzzes past. He takes a swipe at it but misses, and while his hand is out there – is that all? that simple? – he reaches over and quickly counts the money in the box.

Fifty and change, he adds it up. A twenty, two fives, a stack of singles with George staring up at him, lips sealed in collusion. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Ha-ha. Limp, dirty, torn, taped, how many hands have *these* passed through?

Not to make a disturbance, he eyeballs the coins.

You'd think he was a thief.

Yeah, you'd think so, but to prove he's not he puts his empty paws back where they belong on the counter. The only thing that glints on them is his wedding band.

14K gold, that's what it is.

Thirty-three years, and now she's been gone almost another.

Not even a chisel could remove it.

Sam, he shouts, rearranging his stance.

The skin's puckered around his knuckles like it's about to fall off.

I haven't got all day, but, for all he knows, Sam's skipped out and he's alone in the place, him and the dry cleaning. Should he go up to a bag and start talking? Yak about the ghosts on the graveyard shift? You can hear the steam hissing the joint is so dead. He checks the white-faced clock on the wall with the second hand skittering around like something's wrong with it. Seven fifteen, and only if he stretches it. He shakes his wrist to see if his watch jumps ahead. A quarter after, seven fifteen – any way you read it, the day's just begun.

Bang, bang. Gotcha.

He jerks his head.

Loaded up with the cleaning, there's the Chinaman, pushing aside the curtain, and a scrawny kid slipping by, with a gun in his hand.

Sure it's a toy, but at first Jack can't help it, he takes a step back.

David, the Chinaman says, pointing to the curtain, go back in there, but the boy acts like he can't hear. The laundryman raises his eyebrows, as if to say *kids*.

You're dead, the boy says, shooting again.

The cap gun pops, and a string of smoke curls in the air.

Jack considers what the smart aleck said.

You're dead.

Why not, he shrugs, he'll pretend, and in slow motion he leans forward, grips the edge of the counter, and sinks his head in the pile of dirty laundry, the clothes that ten minutes earlier he brought in.

On the phone Cheryl asks him to dinner, and he can't think of a reason to refuse her.

Where do you want to go? she says an hour later, pulling up to the curb in the car he helped finance. The title, at his

insistence, is in both her name and his. Chinese? Pekin House?

He wants to give her a dirty look but why waste it.

They decide to go for Italian.

After a few half-hearted attempts at the seat belt he lets it slip. How often do you get the car washed? he asks, settling back. The floor mats, he's noticed, could stand to be vacuumed. He scans the dashboard. He'd wanted her to get a Chrysler, but she bought a foreign model instead.

Apparently not often enough, is her answer. Stopping at the corner, she casts him a glance.

The trade-in value will be higher, he continues, if you keep up the maintenance.

I just bought the car, she says with a tone in her voice, I'm not thinking of trading it in.

She puts on her blinker to make a left.

That's the problem, he says, fumbling to adjust the seat for more legroom. You can't always think about the present. You have to think about the future. You have to look ahead. Finally he gets the lever to slip into place, and the seat slides back.

In the silence that follows, he realizes something has gotten into him.

Put on your seat belt.

Without protest he does what she says.

The belt cuts across the shoulder of one of the shirts he got back from the cleaners. Now his daughter's the one telling him.

On the right they pass Pedian Carpet, shag on sale, \$9.50 a yard, installed. On the left the Mercury Bowl, where he used to belong to a league. He shifts in his seat. The alley stretches out before him; he can hear the pins crash. *Welcome Back Bowlers*, the sign says.

Didn't you bowl there? her voice comes up at him. A strand of hair falls in her face; she pushes it back.

His hands sit in his lap. A sixteen-pound ball is what he used to throw. Once he got a turkey, three strikes in a row. In the closet there's a shirt with his name. *Jack*.

I liked the cokes, she says. They had a fountain. Cokes on draft, and she gives a little laugh.

When he looks, he's rubbing the place on his thumb where the ball gave him a callus.

They pull into the lot at Malnati's. The place is jammed. Over there, he points to the space vacated by the Lincoln. Coming from the opposite direction, a guy gives his horn a blast. She inches forward. Can they fit? Yeah, she'd beg him for quarters, and after he emptied his pockets, she'd pick the silver out of his hand. Keep the change, he'd tell her as she ran back to the fountain, the pins crashing again.

The rib eye's good tonight, the lanky redhead outside the window is saying as she sidles into her car with a doggy bag.

Are you hungry? he turns to Cheryl. As for him, he has a taste for the spaghetti with Italian meatballs. Get whatever you want, he adds.

Thanks, she says, as if, before he offered, it hadn't been her intention. Maybe I'll have an antipasto salad. She runs her fingers through her hair.

Is that all? Aren't you hungry? Order whatever you want, he urges again. The seat belt snaps. Before she opens her door, he licks his thumb and reaches over to rub the spot he's just noticed on her slacks.

The audience laughs but Jack hardly catches Carson's monologue. Slipping out the belt from his pants, he lies in bed

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and prepares to think about what happened instead. He puts his hands behind his head. Change from his pocket falls on the spread. Next door, the Solomons' porch light goes on, the back door creaks open an inch. Go on, go on, he hears Louie Solomon say in a growl. Jack can picture him nudging the little mongrel, prodding it with his toe. What would you want with an animal like *that*? Into the night the dog yaps.

The spaghetti was good; it always is. He'd carefully cut up the meatballs, the way he did. Cheryl'd gone ahead and ordered the salad, but he insisted she get garlic bread. Lasagna? How about lasagna? You like lasagna, he'd tried again. Eggplant parmesan? Because he knew she liked vegetables, but when she declined he couldn't blame her. Eggplant wasn't for him. Really, the salad is fine, she said, but to make her old man feel better she ate a piece of the bread.

When the waitress came around for coffee, he said yes. Yeah, yeah, I know, he admitted, trying to head his daughter off; but he had a desire for something strong. You're always complaining you can't sleep, Cheryl leaned across the table, going after him like a dog. Don't be so smart, he advised her, but topped it off with a grin. Then he laid up his palms as if to say *hey*?

Herbal tea, she ordered, when the waitress got around to her.

He lets his eyes slide back to the TV. The monologue's just about over, Carson lifts his trademark golf swing. We have a great show tonight, the comedian promises, and Jack finds himself repeating it. A great show. Next door the porch light goes off.

Down the hall, across the olive green shag, faded he's recently noticed, he makes his way to the kitchen. A heel of salami hangs from a hook; a few straggly plants still try to make it on the window

ledge. At the sink he fills up a glass. No, no, it's not a glass he wants, it's a cup, a coffee cup, like the one at Lou Malnati's.

At Malnati's it was a cup.

His tongue rolls across his lips. Again he turns on the tap.

He follows the water down the drain. Did you ever think, he asks whoever's listening, that you'd end up here? And shakes his head in disbelief. Here, and he's insulted by his reflection in the window over the sink, with your stomach hanging over the lip of the counter, your hairy shoulders slumping out of the dago t-shirt you still insist on wearing. He slings a dish towel around his neck. Johnny Carson chortles from the other room, or so he imagines. Over the water Doc Severinsen and the *Tonight Show* band plays. Buddy Rich is the special guest.

He stares at the cup.

Fill it up.

For insurance he tightens his grip.

The refrigerator buzzes. From the basement the furnace revs up. The whole house is getting in on it. Even Louie Solomon's runt, across the passageway, adds his two cents. Jack, Jack, it yaps.

Fill it up.

Just to see if it happens again.

Instead, he ducks under the faucet and lets the water pour over his head. He stays under as long as he can.

When he comes up, dripping wet, there's a guy in the window with a dish-towel over his head. It doesn't take much to know who he is.

At first he sipped his coffee; it was hot. A splash of cream, two sugars, then a third, the works. He'd watched the cream sit on the top. The market's down today, he told her. Silver's up. She looked at him with what she hoped passed for interest; he knew that trumped-up look.

Soon there wasn't much left in the cup. A beat came at him from the jukebox; under the table she moved her foot. How's Solitron doing? she asked, going back to the market. She must've remembered he owned some stock. I got out, he said, lifting the cup to his lips, just before it went under.

She raised hers too, a swig of herb tea as a toast, ha-ha, to getting out before you get under.

Then she drilled him a look over the top.

But he didn't tell her how much he'd lost. A couple grand was his original guess but that was a lowball estimate.

I switched to municipal bonds, he hurried on, and the towns, in dollar signs, marched out in front of him. Chicago Heights, Milwaukee, some swamp in Florida on a tip from his broker. They're tax-free and low risk, he was about to add, a sucker for his own P.R., when his hand, like a remark cut off in the middle, went numb and he dropped the cup.

It thudded across the carpet. Dad, a boy at the next table whispered loudly, that man made a boner.

Someone laughed.

Chicago Heights, Milwaukee, Pasco County...

Kevin, the boy's father said.

The waitress came running up.

Dad, Cheryl chided, shaking her head at his pants.

But his forehead was clammy. He heard his breath.

She looked at him again. With one hand he pulled the other back and put it in his lap.

I'll get it, the waitress said, bending over for the cup. There, the boy pointed.

The checks on the tablecloth were changing places. He rubbed his eyes to see if he could get them to clear up. From the jukebox the bass thumped.

It's nothing, he said even though no one asked.

But right away he knew it was another mechanical failure.

He waved the waitress, who was showing him with napkins, away, and made a pass at the nonchalant. Your old man needs to be towed, he said to his daughter.

She said the only thing she knew how. Dad? she said.

Didn't she have a bigger vocabulary than that?

At this rate he'll miss all of Carson. He'll miss the world-class drummer, Buddy Rich.

A low rumble comes from the bedroom. Carpeted with the dishtowel, he lifts his head. He spots the green plants, trailing along the ledge. They don't stand a chance. The world, he knows, is a jungle. It's a jungle out there, he says, brushing past the table, and his lips come together as if to underline what he's said.

In the bathroom he empties his bladder. He's had to go for a while, but now he can't hold it in. The rumble sounds again. Be right there, he thinks, just a minute. Buddy Rich, calling him.

He watches the drummer knock something out on the screen. Working hard, Rich sweats. Sticks fly, cymbals tip. With the dish towel Jack mops his head.

He's more than tired; he's dead.

What's that tune called? Carson asks when it's over.

Moment's Notice, Rich says.

Jack flicks off the light and shuts his eyes just as Carson pumps the drummer's hand.

In the dark, *Moment's Notice* rolls through him. We'll be right back, Carson says. Jack turns from side to side, his feet pushing the covers. The wind buckles the screen. Someone's laying

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on the horn, a whistle of air escapes his lips, and his eyelids lift themselves open. He doesn't know a thing. Out the window the light – or is it the moon? – wavers behind the trees. Sam's sallow face rises before him; oh, the man in the moon, now he's Chinese. Life is adequate, Mr. Kamin; is that what he said? The face hovers in the breeze. Eleven twenty, and Carson's still guffawing on TV. Behind the shop, does Sam get a little sleep? Does his adequate life give him rest?

Jack pushes up from the pillow and sits, leaning on his hands.

Maybe he'll go outside and howl at the moon. He juts out his head at the mirror as he staggers past.

When he gets to the yard, he scours the sky, but the moon's ducked out, leaving behind a few stars to taunt him with their cut-rate light.

Even nature's trying to conserve.

Jack, is that you? What are you doing out there . . . taking a leak?

Jack swivels around. Caught like a robber in his own backyard. Next door, the screen door's swung open and Louie Solomon's poked out his egg-shaped head. One of his Havana cigars hangs from his mouth.

Just like that mutt of yours, Jack says, trying to recover. He pictures himself lifting one leg to go along with the joke even though it's not very funny. Woof, woof, he might bark, like a dog pleased with itself, trotting away when he's finished.

I'm having a chat with nature. What's your excuse, Louie? Protecting my property? Making sure nobody steals those plums? He points to the tree his son planted from a pit. Go back to sleep.

Louie bites off the end of his cigar and spits it onto the sidewalk. Don't stay out here too long. You might see a ghost, he snorts, closing the door.

Jack shrugs him off, but to play it safe, gives the yard a quick once-over. For the moment anyway, the wind's at a standstill. Does Louie know something he doesn't?

Then he heads over to the plum tree and leans against the trunk, the closest thing out here for support. Every year the tree makes a few puckery plums, and every year he's reminded how much he dislikes them. It's hardly worth the effort, he wants to tell it, but like a dumb dog the tree keeps on trying. He cranks his neck to the sky; the moon's trying to make a comeback. A pair of squinty eyes blinks down at him. He opens his mouth, but instead of howling, he yawns. That's it. That's the best he can do. He could lay down right here. He could take some leaves and make a pile under his head. All he has to do is close his eyes, Cheryl said. He reaches up and rips a few off the tree, plums and all, and shoves the fruit in his mouth. His hands, on their own, go after more. What's he doing? The Chinaman won't stop dogging him. Now he's rustling in the bushes by the alley. *Mr. Kamin*, he jeers. Jack almost expects him to leap out, *bang, bang, you're dead*. And as he raises his arm to fend off a storm – a horde of bugs, out to irritate him – something does barrel out, breaking branches, tearing off leaves, smashing down every limb.

He gags.

Staring across at him is a deer stopped in his passageway.

Its legs are shaking, just like his hands. He swipes at the pulp and spittle smeared on his chin, then, to stop the shaking, thrusts his hands in his pants. He coughs again.

What's a wild animal doing in his backyard?

The deer steps back.

Don't move, he cautions, but doesn't know if he means himself or the deer.

The rough bark of the tree snares his t-shirt. The deer's eyes meet his. *What am I doing here?* they seem to ask.

Please, he whispers, unaccustomed to begging, and a flush of confusion creeps up his neck. The moon, not skimping at all now, makes the animal's coat shine like cement. A quiver, like a single note from a song, ripples through its body.

There's a deer, he wants to tell somebody, in my backyard, but Louie Solomon's shade, for the first time in a decade, is pulled down without a crack. His thumb circles the wedding band embedded in his finger.

Stepping out from the tree, he opens his mouth, wide this time, and with a howl of laughter tells all of Bernard Street. Can you believe this? His voice pelts the sky. The stars shine back with their fleeting light, and the deer, huge and glistening, bounds down the passageway, back to where it came from.

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